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# ON READING THE PLAYS OF MR. HENRY ARTHUR JONES.

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

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A VERY valued friend of mine has the habit of reading plays instead of novels, upon the theory that a three, or four, or five act drama affords as much mental pleasure and profit as the ordinary novel of North America or Europe, and rather more refreshment, since it can be devoured in a tenth or twentieth of the time, and leaves him with nothing of that fatigue and distension apt to follow the consumption of narrative fiction. He reads French plays, of course, and German and Scandinavian plays, but his main reliance is the Spanish plays which the dramatic genius of their nation supplies in such great abundance and variety; he would read English and American plays if he could get them; but he finds that they are less often printed than the others.

I confess that I am strongly of his taste, though not perfectly; for I am, or have been, a great reader of novels, in which I think I can get closer to nature and find ampler room for the imagination than in plays. It is true, however, that I have come to that time of life when one does not so willingly read new as old novels, and because of its brevity I can much more easily get away with a new drama. I do not find the printed aspect of drama so intolerably repulsive as another valued friend of mine, who alleges its italics, abbreviations, brackets, parentheses, and the telegraphic diction of its stage directions as sufficient provocation for turning from the mere sight of it with loathing. I own that these features of the printed drama are abhorrent, but I put against them the quotation marks, and the helpless repetition and variation of the "he said" and "cried she," and "whispered they" and "shouted we," and "ejaculated the

others"; and upon the whole I am not more revolted by the hiccupping stage direction of the plays. As a mere matter of personal history, I may say that I have read vast quantities of these, beginning with Shakespeare and going to the old Spanish authors like Cervantes, and Lope de Vega, and all but ending with the new Spanish authors like Estebanez and Echegaray, but never including much of what are called Elizabethan dramatists, for want of a better name to shun them by. A play or two by Webster, by Marlowe, by Greene, by Haywood, and Beaumont and Fletcher, and the rest may be given to the poor of the Carnegie libraries, together with the whole mass, comic and tragic, of rare Ben Jonson; I could wish he had been still rarer in either sort. Mr. Lowell, most powerfully digestant of all manner of literature, once reproached me for my shadiness, as he gently called my ignorance concerning these dramatists, but though I felt his reproach keenly, I could do little to retrieve myself from it. On the other hand, I have browsed large acreages of the minor British drama, and I do not suppose there is any man now living who has forgotten so many plays of Kotzebue. The modern German drama I know almost solely on the stage; but I have been an impassioned reader of Ibsen, of Björnsen, and what other Scandinavians I could lay my hands upon in translation. The most artless, if not the most hopeless, Georgian and early Victorian British plays were not unknown to my bold and adventurous youth, and the blithe and beautiful inventions of Sir William Gilbert would have fallen threadbare under my eye if repeated, if incessant perusals could have worn their texture away. Need I say that the incomparably paradoxical dramatizations of human motive by Mr. George Bernard Shaw have been my daily, my nightly, joy? I have had equal joy (but how different!) of the one or two plays of Mr. Pinero which have fallen in my way, and of which I could not say better than that they fill the mind as they fill the stage. Among American plays I know only the excellently imagined, excellently contrived, plays of Mr. Augustus Thomas, from reading, and can but grieve that I do not know any piece of Mr. Clyde Fitch's or Mr. Gillette's except in the theatre, where I always like them. I will not speak of my forays in the fields of the French theatre, partly because they would have been expected, and partly because they were not wide or far; but of Italian plays I may say that I have

read almost as many as of Kotzebue's, who singly produced almost a whole dramatic literature. Not a tragedy of Alfieri, not a comedy of Goldoni, I suppose, has escaped me; and there were troops of Italian dramatists of the militant period of 1860-1865 whose rosters I could once have called from memory. If I now mention solely Giacometti, who wrote "*La Morte Civile*," I think it is as much as ought to be asked of me.

I do not quite know why I impart these facts; I hope it is not merely to brag of my prowess and achievements; possibly it is to offer some assurance of my fitness to judge, relatively, at least, the dramatic work of Mr. Henry Arthur Jones, which, not to hold the reader in suspense, I will say that I have long delighted in on the stage, and have lately been enjoying almost as much in print. I do not say quite as much, because my pleasure in seeing several of them has been superlative, and in reading them it has been comparative. The best of them has not given me that ultimate literary satisfaction which I have got, say, from "Ghosts" or "Hedda Gabler," from "The Bankrupt" or "The Glove," from "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray," from "*La Morte Civile*," from "Arms and the Man"; and yet "Judah," and "Mrs. Dane's Defence," and "The Hypocrites," and "Whitewashing Julia," and "The Manceuvres of Jane," and "Michael and his Lost Angel" are so nearly as good reading as those others that I should be at a loss to say just why they are not entirely so. I am not sure, on second thought, that the first and the last are not entirely so. Unquestionably, they have the literary quality which it was once fatuously supposed a good stage-play could do without, but which in the present revival of the drama the playwrights are again trying to impart to their work. It is now the novelists who are apparently supposing that their work can do without literary quality.

My acquaintance with Mr. Jones's drama in the theatre began with that powerful play, "Judah," which I think neither he nor any other modern has surpassed in strength of motive. It still has, in my yesterday's reading, a freshness of story, a strength and symmetry of design, an intensity of passion, a variety and accuracy of character, a naturalness and simplicity of action, and above all a fealty to the eternal verities which at once made me sensible of a masterpiece, and without which there can be no masterpieces. I doubt if in the whole wide and varied range of

his performance the author has struck so deep and rich and moving a note. I am not forgetting "Michael and his Lost Angel" or "Mrs. Dane's Defence," two plays which grappled with problems as perpetually interesting as that of "Judah," if not situations so new, and solved them with as frank and bold an appeal to the reader's sense of justice, and to those statutes of righteousness which no suffering and no repentance can enable error to escape. In the political and social world the law is often, perhaps oftenest, broken with impunity, but in the moral world, where we ultimately have our being, where we truly live, there is no forgiveness but to open confession and to utter submission. That is, therefore, the supreme moment in "Mrs. Dane's Defence," where, when she has owned her guilt, she asks if the world is not very hard on such women as she, and it is answered her, "No, not the world, but the Law"; and where she is made to witness that every one has been kind or sparing, but that there was something in her lie which could not forgive her.

It is to this moral that all the serious drama of Mr. Jones pays allegiance. Outside of it, indeed, there is no artistic force for any one except for comedy, and perhaps only for that lowest form of comedy which we call "farce." Even there, even in the wildest burlesque, the art is truer if there is truth in the motive, in the character, in the action. Somehow, if we are not very young, or thoughtless, or inexperienced, the enacted or embodied falsehood hurts, and the truth, however mercilessly enforced, heals. We go home happier from some austere tragedy, in which the violated law prevails, than from the drollest comic opera in which it has been successfully defied. Art instinctively recognizes this fact, and the skill which refuses to acknowledge it is not art, but only the conjurer's sleight. In every time the drama has had it for its ideal, and followed it, though often lamely and far off; in no time has this ideal been more constantly the inspiration of the dramatist than in ours; and with none of our English-speaking dramatists has it been more the increasing purpose than with the author of "Judah," "Michael and his Lost Angel," "The Hypocrites," "Mrs. Dane's Defence," "The Galilean."

I do not suppose this author has at any time said to himself, "Come, or Go to: here is the thing that can be worked indefinitely,

and with mounting effect," and has thereupon gone about building one drama after another on that secure foundation. On the contrary, I find him here and there shirking the ideal, not wholly, but in part; though commonly in his longest lapses his prevailing sense of the truth searches him out, and at some moment or other brings him to book. In certain of his plays, like "*The Case of Rebellious Susan*," he makes the spectator fairly face the great moral fact that what is bad for a man is no worse for a woman; and then he joins him in recognizing the minor social fact that though a woman does nothing worse than a man she pays a far more ruinous fine, and must be kept from his sin, and restored to his guilty embrace as a forgiving wife. The end is cleverly and naturally contrived, but for once, when the case was so squarely presented, one would have liked the issue to have been as square; one would have liked the forgiveness to have been an even thing and upon like grounds. To be sure, the fine ironic implications would then have been impossible, and we should not have had a comedy, but something awfully different.

As it is, "*The Case of Rebellious Susan*" is very good reading, and the situation so amply and sufficiently relieves the truth that we can forego the satisfaction of its final enforcement. But, comedy for comedy, it is not so delicately handled, so amusingly imagined, as "*Whitewashing Julia*," which was perhaps only too fine, too reticent of the author's knowledge of the facts, to seize, or at any rate to keep, the interest of the spectator. With the reader it can very well be different. If he is a reader worthy of the pleasure it can give, his pleasure from it will be exquisite and lasting. The question whether Julia really needed whitewashing or not is held in abeyance from the beginning to the end with a skill not surpassed in its way, and is finally put by when the generous reprobate who marries Julia refuses to enter into the mystery of her past.

That is a fine dramatic triumph, and the action of the reprobate is so essentially aristocratic in its supreme indifference to the opinion of others, or even his own, that it must go far to solve a certain doubt. The doubt is whether drama so much in sympathy with the middle-class virtues of honesty, chastity and sobriety as Mr. Jones's can be quite faithful to the life and character of the noble and gentle personages figuring in it. They do not superabound in it, but some of them there must be to satisfy

the demand of the theatre if not to form a true conspect of English society. They are shown frank, rude, simple, easy, selfish, brave and mostly amiable; and for the greater part they transact the doubtful business of the plays with an indifference to the points of morality concerned which their inferiors cannot even affect, unless they are very much their inferiors. There is, short of the divorce court, but not always short of it, a good deal of love-making among them of a kind held culpable in the middle ranks of society. In certain exigencies, the men lie freely to "save" the women they have compromised; it is rather an ideal of theirs to lie freely in such cases, and doubtless it is with more difficulty that the dramatist contrives to enforce his own ideal of truth against their convention than he finds in the case of people with middle-class consciences. The plays in which they most appear are the lighter actions, in which serious conduct is not required of them.

Whether they are really an addition to the resources of the dramatist is very much the same question as whether they are an addition to civilization, and involves a like doubt. But they are a fact of English society and they cannot very well be blinked. Mr. Jones does not blink them, but he does not employ them for any prime purpose, so far as I now recall, except in "The Dancing Girl," and there not convincingly. No lording of them all is elsewhere crucially tormented by his conscience, or is stretched upon the rack where many a commoner must lie. Perhaps in "Joseph Entangled" they are, both sexes, employed more largely to the exclusion of the lower middle classes than in the other pieces. But in most of the actions the dramatist has the effect of externating himself in more than usual measure from them. That is, his important meanings, his vital morals, are evolved from the character of untitled persons, and involved in their just fate. One would say that perhaps he felt that titled persons were best left to their God, in such matters, though in treating of these so almost exclusively in the case of commoners, it is not apparently from any middle-class awe of titles. Only once do I recall a doubt of this, which nothing short of a direct explanation could clear up. In "The Princess's Nose," a blackguard journalist makes love to the princess, while the blackguard prince (a foreign title) is making love to another's wife. In the end the prince horsewhips the journalist, perhaps justly; there would

be no perhaps if some one horsewhipped the prince. It is the dramatist's failure to provide this agency that leaves his ethics limping. But, as I say, this seems the single instance in which the dramatist, so essentially ethical in his force, has been wanting in exact justice between the classes.

I have a fancy that this play is an earlier play of the author's, written before he found his feet firmly. There is a very wide range in his work, all the way from good to bad; the indifferent is eliminated, for the most part, as on certain English railways there is paradoxically a first class and a third class, but no second class. Although the best plays are generally the latest, some of the earliest are also the best, as, for instance, "Judah." In the very latest, the author has gone farthest to realize his ideal of conduct owing supreme and single allegiance to the truth; and he has cast himself with fearlessness on the diffuser art of the novelist as it may be distinguished from the art of the dramatist. The play is now meeting its fate before the public of the theatre; but I should not be surprised if its best public were that of the closet, where the silence and the solitude will be more favorable to the intention, which does not seek its fulfilment through the stage traditions, and where there is time for the largest subjective plot to work itself out in the reader's imagination.

All in all, there are some twenty of Mr. Jones's plays which I have read. None is exactly tragedy, none is exactly comedy; but I could not say that any was not explicitly or tacitly serious. They are very like life in that, and they are like life in being mostly clear and straight in meaning. We pretend to be very complex as to our behavior and the principles that control it; but really we are entirely simple, except when we humbug ourselves into the belief that we are very involved as to either; perhaps we are then still simple. Mr. Jones, at any rate, addresses us in very plain terms, and no matter how startling his dramatic proposition is or how bold its solution, his view of human nature is not beclouded by any vapors stirred up in the juggle with his own consciousness; he is rather like Shakespeare in that. How absolute the moral and artistic veracity of "The Hypocrites" is, in spite of certain plunges that sound the depths of our nature, whether it is normal or abnormal!

His nearest approach to the mystical—but how little myste-



rious he is about it!—is, I should say, in that beautiful and touching little one-act play, “Grace Mary.” This is sole among his pieces in being a dialect piece; the others are in the every-day English of the speakers’ respective convention. Possibly it is by sinking to the mother earth below the usual world that, in “Grace Mary,” the author reaches a height of poetry untouched elsewhere in his work. Next it, in a certain literary quality, is that mere scene which he calls “The Goal,” and which also is unalloyedly good.

But the plays are all good reading, in a day when so many plays are good reading. Of course, I should wish their friends to go to the theatre for them, but where this cannot be, they will bring the theatre to their friends. Besides the plays themselves, the author has written several essays on the modern drama, and the pleasure and business of it. In meditating these slight and vague comments, I said to myself that I could keep an opener mind for my work if I did not first read these essays. Now that my work is done, I have still an open mind, for I have not yet read these essays. All the more freely and fully, therefore, can I commend them to the reader’s perusal.

W. D. HOWELLS.